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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 006500

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SUBJECT: TRILATERAL WATER TALKS MOVE FORWARD COOPERATION,  
TOUCH ON LONGER-TERM APPROACHES TO WATER SCARCITY

REF: TEL AVIV 3442

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a joint Embassy Tel Aviv - Consulate General Jerusalem message.

**¶11. (C)** Summary: Palestinian and Israeli water chiefs and their staffs held a thorough exchange focusing on water supply issues for Gaza and the West Bank during U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian Trilateral Water Talks at USAID offices in Tel Aviv December 9. The Israeli and Palestinian officials agreed to address a variety of immediate and long-term issues in bilateral Joint Water Committee (JWC) and Joint Technical Committee (JTC) meetings later this month. Israeli Water Commissioner Shimon Tal and Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) Chairman Nabil Sharif agreed on the need to engage in long-term planning while cooperating closely on immediate supply needs. Revisiting themes from a meeting with Ambassador Kurtzer and Consul General Pearce earlier that day, Sharif called for an active U.S. dialogue with the Palestinians and resumption of major water projects in the Gaza Strip. Both Tal and Sharif identified desalination (desal) as a key factor in handling future supply gaps. Coordination of wastewater treatment with water supply planning was also highlighted as key to addressing water shortages. Embassy and Consulate General will encourage both parties to hold near-term detailed discussions on the impact of Gaza disengagement on water supply and infrastructure arrangements. End summary.

#### IMMEDIATE NEEDS AND A LONG-TERM VISION

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**¶12. (C)** The latest meeting of the Trilateral Water Working Group, chaired by NEA Senior S&T Advisor Charles Lawson, was held on December 9, less than six months after the last session (reftel). Despite occasional sparring, Israeli and Palestinian participants praised the close cooperation of the "water club" and emphasized the need to work together even more closely on immediate water needs and longer-term planning. PWA Chairman Sharif opened by saying "If we are to be a state, we need to have our own source of water. There will be no trade in water and we will be the owners of the water source," referring to the suspended Gaza desalination project. (Comment: Although Sharif opened with a hard-line statement, he proceeded to soften his tone during the meeting, repeatedly reiterating the need for cooperation. End Comment). In the course of the three-hour meeting, Sharif and his deputy Fadel Kawash voiced flexibility regarding new sources of water supplies, whether from jointly-agreed new wells, re-use of wastewater, desal, or purchase from Israeli water company Mekorot.

**¶13. (C)** Israeli Water Commissioner Tal noted that within Israel new supplies would be coming on line from the Ashkelon desal plant and from treatment at more than forty wastewater effluent points that would yield 150 million cubic meters of water over the next two years. Tal and planning chief Yossef Dreizin said it was time to create "a new vision" for the future of water in the West Bank and Gaza, as a decade had passed since the Interim Agreement. (Comment: This was clearly an attempt by the Israeli side to begin the thinking and planning process towards negotiations on water. End comment). Kawash detailed water supply problems in the northern West Bank. He also touched on training needs for PWA personnel. Both sides agreed with Lawson's suggestion that JWC and JTC meetings later this month review the overall water supply situation in the West Bank and then recommend how best the USG could assist.

**¶14. (C)** Both sides also agreed to a renewed emphasis on coordinating water supply and wastewater treatment efforts. The Palestinian side and the JWC intend to invite donors to a coordination meeting on such projects after the January 9 Palestinian presidential election, with USAID providing technical support for that session as needed. The Israelis and Palestinians also agreed to facilitate new Israeli supplies of water for Ramallah, and to agree on a location for the Gaza emergency connector before the end of the calendar year. All parties pledged to include public awareness outreach efforts to enhance understanding of the benefits of wastewater treatment projects, especially for farmers who could use treated wastewater for irrigation. The upcoming JWC/JTC meetings will discuss and handle the issue of unauthorized wells on the West Bank as a bilateral issue.

LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD

15. (C) In separate conversations on the margins of the Trilateral Water Working Group meeting, both Tal and Sharif told Lawson that they were ready to enter into water negotiations whenever their respective leaderships give the approval. At the talks, Sharif stated that both emergency needs and long-term planning should work in parallel, calling the latter even "more important" than the present needs detailed by his deputy. Tal noted the degradation of the quality of water in shared aquifers due to population pressures as an added incentive for forward planning. Sharif and Tal agreed they would report back to U.S. colleagues on discussions in the JWC and/or JTC on broad future planning, including what kind of involvement they want from the USG. They also agreed to restore the frequency of the Trilateral Meetings, committing to a new round of talks in approximately three months.

PWA Chair Urges Stronger U.S. Engagement with Palestinians

16. (C) Echoing comments he had made earlier at a working breakfast with Lawson and in a private meeting with Ambassador Kurtzer and Consul General Pearce that morning, Sharif made an impassioned plea for the U.S. to engage with Palestinians across the full range of development issues, and "...lead the international community back to Gaza," and to let the Palestinian public know that the U.S. was making major contributions to infrastructure development and poverty alleviation. In their private meeting with Sharif, the Ambassador and Consul General emphasized that progress was needed on the Palestinian security investigation into the October 15, 2003 attack on the USG convoy in Gaza before they could recommend resumption of USAID projects in Gaza. Sharif expressed concern that not enough attention was being given to the USG role in development projects in the region. Middle Easterners see images of the devastation in Iraq rather than images highlighting all the contributions that the USG has made to develop Iraq. Sharif stressed that a lack of USG action in Gaza could compound the negative perception of the USG's regional role.

17. (C) In response, the Ambassador and Consul General said that Sharif could assist by bringing water issues to the forefront with the Palestinian leadership, especially the impact the Gaza projects will have on the 1.3 million people in Gaza. The CG noted his sense that to the leadership in the West Bank, the Gaza water projects remain somewhat abstract assistance projects, since they are not living through the very difficult water situation in Gaza. The more the West Bank leadership hears from those living in Gaza about the importance of the projects, the better. Then the leadership may come to understand how their actions on security issues in Gaza will have a practical effect on the Gaza population.

Still to be Addressed: Disengagement and Water Infrastructure

18. (C) Comment: This latest round of talks was positive and bodes well for future cooperation. At one point, Sharif went so far as to say "The Intifada is over...the man is dead." This reference to Arafat's passing further emphasized Sharif's interest in moving forward. Despite their relatively close collaboration and the progressive atmosphere evidenced in the talks, Israeli and Palestinian water officials have not yet directly tackled the impact that disengagement from Gaza will have on water issues. The GOI has pledged to leave water infrastructure intact, but the reality on the ground promises to be more complicated. The Embassy and Consulate General will be encouraging Tal, Sharif, and their staffs to look at supply and maintenance arrangements, to help avoid collateral damage to water infrastructure as settlements are evacuated, and to pay close attention to the health of the Coastal Aquifer. End comment.

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